

Hangin' with the Sistas in Melsisi

Sara Lightner

The amazing ladies in their blue coattresses and white wimples walked into my life (or perhaps I stumbled into theirs!) and changed it forever. I look back on my years as an English teacher at Collège de Melsisi, on the island of Pentecost in Northern Vanuatu, and all I can do is shake my head in wonder. The sisters didn't know me from Adam, but they folded me into their hearts and showed me an acceptance and warmth that is hard to believe. In the following reflection, I reminisce on my time living in the convent on the hill, in a life where "Je vous salue, Marie" was a daily phrase, and where the laughter of the sisters echoed down the hall and into my little room. During times of homesickness or uncertainty, the sound of that laughter kept me grounded and gave me solace. During times of happiness and celebration, their chuckles were infectious. To the sisters with whom I lived in Melsisi—Pascalina, Angela, and Gemma—I dedicate this piece.

From January 2001 to December 2002 I lived with three Ni-Vanuatu Catholic sisters at la Mission de Melsisi, the home of the Notre Dame de Sept Douleurs (Our Mother of Seven Sorrows Catholic Church), on the island of Pentecost in northern Vanuatu. I must admit that it was not my first choice of residence, and when that rickety truck dumped me at the convent—a huge, foreboding, cement structure, on a hill dotted with cow patties, in the middle of what I then perceived as nowhere—I forced myself to smile when I really wanted to cry. The church was in the (not so graceful) process of falling down as a result of major earthquake damage in 1999, there was a cemetery plot directly behind the convent that seemed just a bit eerie, and the wind blew through the valley with such force that I feared I would be whipped out to sea. The physical surroundings of my new home in Central Pentecost made me feel less than welcome. I was assured that this was just “a temporary measure” until the school found a house for me, the mission’s new *pis kops* (Peace Corps Volunteer). That temporary measure lasted nearly two years!



*Photo 1. Sr Angela (Ranmawat, Pentecost), Sr Pascalina (Loanatom, Tanna), Sr Gemma (Walarano, Malakula).
Photo by Sara Lightner.*

From the moment the truck dropped me and my *puskat* (kitten) on the doorstep, the sisters were giving me life lessons. The first one came very quickly. Sister Pascalina grabbed one of my bags and ushered me to my room, which was located in the bottom level of the convent, down a dark and claustrophobic hallway. Metal doors with deadbolts, three on either side of the hallway, welcomed me to my new home. The rooms were usually bolted shut and void of everything but cobwebs and cockroaches, and there were little prison-esque windows to the left of each door that faced the hallway. The windows were small—only three louvers—and they were up so high that you couldn't even see through them. I could only imagine the ghosts of sisters and would-be sisters of generations past occupying these little rooms. At the end of the hallway, on the right (west, ocean facing) side, we came to a particularly beat-up looking door. As Sister

Pascalina sifted and rattled through her bundle of keys, located the longest skeleton key I had ever seen, unlocked the door, and slid out the bolt, the noise reverberated along the cement walls.

The room held a single bed with broken springs and an inch-thick foam mattress, a little sink (how happy was I that Melsisi had a gravity-driven water system, with pipes carrying water from the bush!), a chair and a table, and a rickety red wardrobe. That was it—*c'est tout*. But what a gorgeous view of the ocean sparkling in the distance! The vibrant green points that jutted out along the western coastline contrasted with the deep blue of the waves that lapped (and sometimes violently crashed) onto the smooth stones of the shore. Little did I realize that I would come to know every nook and cranny of that coast as I waited and watched for cargo ships during all hours of night and day. Just beyond the window, the New Caledonian mango tree stood in all its stateliness, with a variety of colorful flowers and crotons skirting its gnarled trunk. (At the time I did not appreciate the fact that the barbed-wire fence surrounding the sisters' garden was used to keep out mango thieves, who desperately wanted to partake of the golden flesh of the prized New Caledonian mango with its flat seed and nearly red skin!).

But back to my first lesson. I carelessly dumped one of my boxes on my new bed and a rat bolted across the floor, jarred into movement by the box hitting the springs. I screamed bloody murder and catapulted myself onto the chair as the rat dived behind the monstrous wardrobe. (In all of my years as a farm girl, I was never able to overcome my fear of those red-eyed beasts!) In one fluid movement, Sister Pascalina walked to the other side of the room (which was not an extremely long jaunt) and calmly and casually slammed the wardrobe against the cement block wall. Thud. She pulled back the wardrobe, grabbed the deceased rat by its tail, and matter-of-factly tossed it through the open glass windows to the foot of the mango tree. I truly believe that, at that exact moment, our friendship was born.

We named our chickens and then ate them for dinner. We begged the gregarious mission priest to set up his generator so that we could watch a black-and-white version of *The Swiss Family Robinson* in French while we drank kava. We sipped hot sodas on

Sunday afternoons at the beach and devised stone-throwing competitions. Sister Pascalina couldn't drink kava in front of her brother (a priest) because it was a cultural *tabu*, but he could still buy it for us if I took him the plastic container. They teased me about having a boyfriend and screened my calls on the convent phone, nearly sending me into orbit. We dressed up in frilly island dresses and drank kava, leaning on the verandah railing and pretending we were on a ship's deck. We ate bread dunked in Milo, by the light of the kerosene lamp. Sometimes the sisters even made their special *la soupe* with pasta sent from the Italian priest on Tanna.

We went fishing on the reef with our bottle-and-string fishing apparatuses. We swapped stories about our families, and I entertained them with amusing anecdotes of Iowa farm life. They went with me to the beach in the middle of the night to meet the cargo ship so that I could pick up my mail. We commiserated over our visitor from hell, the French tourist Dominique, who stole my toilet paper and my garlic. We made "pizza" with tin fish, catsup, and cake flour to sell at the school's *nakamal* (kava bar). We constructed the thin, tasteless wafers for communion. Sister Gemma taught me how to gut a chicken and wrap its intestines around a stick to roast them over the fire. Sister Pascalina taught me how to make a coconut broom from the spines of individual coconut leaves. Sister Angela took me to the health clinic to watch the birth of a baby. Sister Pascalina taught me how to scrub my clothes with intensive vigor until stains didn't even have a chance of survival. She also educated me about the necessity of throwing away one's used peanut shells and not leaving clothes on the line overnight, as a caution against *nakaemas* (black magic). The sisters welcomed my guests with open arms, and even drank a beer with my dad on the convent verandah. They felt it necessary to dance around me as bodyguards when we went to the Independence Day festivities; no *man Pentikos* (boy from Pentecost) could come within ten feet of me! They gave me advice when I was sick and made me lemongrass tea to cure my ills. Sometimes we laughed so hard we cried. Sometimes we sat in silence. They touched my life in ways that, at the time, I didn't realize. And for that and so many things, I am grateful.

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Peace Corps Volunteer from October 1999 to February 2005, on North Efate, Pentecost, and in the capital, Port Vila. I taught English at Onesua Presbyterian College (North Efate) and Collège de Melsisi (Pentecost), and I coordinated the Vanuatu National History Curriculum Project, housed at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (located in Vila). I also spent from August to December 2006 in Vanuatu, simultaneously “hangin’ with the sistas” and working on my thesis project.